UNDER THE SIGN OF THE DEĒSIS:
ON THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATIVENESS IN
MEDIEVAL ART AND LITERATURE

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"Si usano segni e segni di segni solo quando ci fanno difetto le cose."

Umberto Eco

I

In a notable lecture at Dumbarton Oaks in March 1985, Ernst Kitzinger discussed the famous mosaic in the Martorana (S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio) at Palermo showing George of Antioch prostrate before the Virgin. He pointed particularly to the use of the term δέησις in the inscription above the admiral and, following S. Der Nersessian,[1] related the attitude of the Virgin to that of the Mother of God formerly evident on the templon screen of Daphni and still preserved in the "two-figure Deēsis" before which Isaac Comnenus and Melane the nun kneel in the Church of the Chora.[2] Now the presence of the word Deēsis in the inscription at the Martorana does not require that this was the Byzantine term used for such a composition, although, when the mosaic is related to that at Kariye Camii, there may be reason to suppose that this arrangement of figures was at least one regarded as conveying the idea of entreaty or supplication. Moreover, the persistence of a Deēsis with two rather than three sacred figures should serve as a caution that there is nothing immutable about the more usual triadic composition.

Nonetheless, the literature on the subject[3] has traditionally equated the term Deēsis with a group of three figures, specifically, Christ between the Virgin and St. John Prodromos. This particular arrangement does not survive among the mosaics of Norman Sicily, although, as O. Demus observed, in the eighteenth-century restoration of the apse mosaic of the Cappella Palatina, the figure of the Magdalen displaced one that probably represented the Virgin.[4] With the Prodromos, one of four figures[5] on the wall beneath the conch which

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[1] "Two Images of the Virgin in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection," *DOP* 14 (1960), 71–86. Since the present study was written, a broader version of Kitzinger's lecture has appeared: Ἔνας ναὸς τοῦ 12ου αἰῶνα ἀφιερωμένος στή Θεοτόκο. Ἡ Παναγία τοῦ Ναυάρχου στό Παλέρμο, Δελτ.Χριστ.ʾΑρχ.ʾΕτ., 4th ser., 12 (1984). See esp. 185–88.

[2] P. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami* (New York, 1966), I, 45–48; II, pls. 36–41.

[3] Studies devoted in whole or in part to the Deēsis are legion. Those most frequently cited in this paper are D. Mouriki, "A Deesis Icon in the Art Museum," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 28 (1968), 13–28; C. Walter, "Two Notes on the Deēsis," *REB* 26 (1968), 311–36; idem, "Further Notes on the Deēsis," *REB* 28 (1970), 161–87 (both reprinted in Walter's volume cited in note 80 below); see also idem, "Bulletin on the Deēsis and the Paraclesis," *REB* 38 (1980), 261–69; and M. Andaloro, "Note sui temi iconografici e della Haghiosoritissa," *RIASA* 17 (1970), 85–153. Together, these four works contain references to the majority of the older literature. A more recent survey of "conventional" Deēsis representations throughout the Orthodox world is T. Velmans, "L'image de la Déisis dans les églises de Géorgie et dans celles d'autres régions du monde byzantin," *CahArch* 29 (1980–81), 47 ff. I have cited such works only where they pertain directly to my argument or to the objects on which it is based.

[4] O. Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London, 1949), 37, 55, pl. 8.

[5] To the present Magdalen's right is an image of St. Peter while, to the left of the Prodromos, is St. James. For the state of conservation of these flanking figures, see ibid., 62 note 58.

contains the image of Christ, Mary would have formed part of a Deēsis. The Magdalen here is obviously a replacement, made much later and apparently uncomprehending of the imagery involved. Yet, in a remarkable number of cases an "alien" third person is not a *substitute* for one of the "canonical" group (usually the Forerunner) but a representation in its own right, part of a set meaningful on its own terms, to be understood in a way other than that which reduces the Deēsis to a prescribed set of figures.

Even before we discuss this point, which I shall do by presenting several texts and images (known to scholars but not heretofore introduced into the argument), it is imperative to consider the state of research on the Deēsis and, above all, the emphasis upon the *interpretation* of this theme. Of late, the necessity of interpreting (rather than merely perceiving) Byzantine art has been insisted upon.[6] In fact, for nearly twenty years, the *meaning* of the Deēsis has preoccupied the attention of those who have studied it closely, even at the expense of plotting the course of its known variants, divergencies of content and context that are essential to an adequate definition and, by extension, to any understanding of the theme. Briefly, but perhaps not unfairly, it may be said, first, that the historian's reading of the term Deēsis as signifying a plea[7] has been interpreted by some art historians to mean that the image of the Deēsis was an emblem of intercession (παράκλησις).[8] A second view, stressing that the group normally called the Deēsis is to be understood as a special section of the celestial hierarchy witnessing to the divinity of the Logos,[9] has gradually succeeded, if not supplanted, the first interpretation.

It may be that the Deēsis is suffering, as Peter Brown said of Iconoclasm, from "a crisis of over-explanation."[10] The error of imposing a single interpretation upon a particular piece of Byzantine sacred imagery has long been appreciated.[11] But the even greater danger (once neatly labeled the "dictionary fallacy") of "assuming a one-to-one relationship between sign and significance"[12] is especially pressing in the case of the Deēsis, on the one hand, because so many representatives of this image are portable objects, deprived of their pristine function; and, on the other, because, even when the example is monumental and thus to be seen in something approaching its original setting, a just estimate of its significance may depend upon a proper reading of that setting in toto. V. A. Kolve has recently and precisely stated the nub of the issue: "it is context alone that turns a sign into a communication, limiting its possibilities, defining its exact and immediate intent."[13]

II

Precursors of or variants on the Deēsis have been seen in works as diverse as an icon in Kiev showing the Prodromos standing between figures of Christ and the Mother of God who turns toward him;[14] the miniature in the Vatican Cosmas Indicopleustes showing Christ between the Virgin and John (inscribed O BAΠTIΣTHC) accompanied by Zacharias and Elizabeth beneath Anna and Simeon in *clipei* above them;[15] the "two-figure Deēsis," already mentioned, to be supplemented, according to M. Andaloro, by a reliquary casket in the Vatican bearing the Virgin turning toward Christ, two half-length angels in the central panels, and Peter and Paul shown full-length on either side of

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[6] R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons* (London, 1985), 6, 10, and passim.

[7] The term Deēsis is common in administrative parlance between the 7th and the second half of the 11th century, especially in connection with the officer ὁ ἐπὶ τῶν δεήσεων ("Master of Requests"), who succeeded the antique *magister memoriae*. His job was to judge the fitness for reception by the emperor of pleas addressed to the sovereign; sometimes they were answered by this dignitary himself. For seals of such officers, see V. Laurent, *Corpus des sceaux de l'empire byzantin*, II. *L'administration centrale* (Paris, 1981), nos. 230–55; and, on the office generally, R. Guilland, "Le 'Maître des Requêtes'," *Byz* 35 (1965), 97–118. See also Walter, "Two Notes," 317.

[8] Mouriki, "A Deesis Icon." This view has recently been reaffirmed by M. E. Frazer in *The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art* (New York, 1983), exhibition catalogue, no. 40, à propos of the ivory triptych in the Museo Sacro.

[9] Walter, "Two Notes"; idem, "Further Notes." See also T. von Bogyay, s.v. Deesis in *LCI* 1 (1968), cols. 494 ff. For a modified and subtler reading, see A. W. Carr in *Gesta* 21 (1982), 6.

[10] "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," *EHR* 88 (1973), 3.

[11] C. Mango in H. Kähler, *Hagia Sophia* (New York, 1967), 54. For specific examples of polyvalent imagery, see N. Thierry and A. Tenenbaum, "Le cénacle apostolique à Kokar kilise et Ayvalı kilise en Cappadoce: Mission des Apôtres, Pentecôte, Jugement Dernier," *JSav* (Oct.-Dec. 1973), 229–41, and A. Cutler, "Apostolic Monasticism at Tokalı Kilise in Cappadocia," *AS* 35 (1985), 57–65

[12] E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1972), 11.

[13] V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford, 1984), 73–74.

[14] K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. The Icons*, I (Princeton, 1976), 34–35, pls. XIV, LVII, here said to be of "the end of the fifth century" or "about sixth century." For supposed literary versions of the Deēsis of this period, see I. Myslivets, "Proishoždenie Deisusa" in *Vizantija, južnye slavjane i drevnaja Rus* (= Festschrift Lazarev) (Moscow, 1973), 59–73.

[15] Andaloro, "Note" (note 3 above), 93, fig. 35, describes the image as "un incunabolo fino ad un certo punto."

the Cross;[16] "a Deēsis with two substitutes": Christ flanked by Mark and Isidore in the Capella di Sant' Isidoro in S. Marco, Venice;[17] and the lunette mosaic in the narthex of St. Sophia, Constantinople.[18] Furthermore, it is customary among sigillographers to identify as a Deēsis a great variety of images which, while lacking the term in their legend and displaying saints such as Nicholas, Menas Kallikelados, Panteleimon, and Demetrius on either side of the Virgin, or of Christ in a medallion above them, conform approximately to the triadic composition associated with the "normal" Deēsis.[19]

Even this random canvass of the literature suggests that art historians have implicitly rejected the limitation of the term to the familiar group showing the Lord flanked by the Prodromos and the Mother of God. The implication is that Byzantine artists enjoyed no such restriction, creating a large number of Deēsis-like compositions without feeling harried by rigidly defined rules of content. Indeed, going further than others, two scholars have recently described as "a kind of *deesis*" a picture known to have been set up by Manuel I in the Blachernae Palace showing the Virgin in a conch between the emperor and his parents (or possibly only the latter).[20] Was the Deēsis a concept, realized in widely diverse forms, a group comprising a limited number of "acceptable" figures, or simply a compositional scheme? The only way to tell is to consider the way the term was used in Byzantine references to Byzantine works of art. Uniquely useful in this respect is a passage in the late eleventh-century Life of Lazarus the Galesiote by Gregory, his disciple.[21] The author pauses in his

biography to relate the death of an old monk named Nikon:

> In the hour that he was about to expire he stood with his brethren at Compline and before the Dismissal prayed and made obeisance to his brethren. And he came out to the refectory—for it was there that he slept on the ground—and lay down on his straw mat in the place in which there are holy images of the Theotokos and of the archangel Michael stretching out [their arms] in supplication to the Saviour, and quietly surrendered his soul to God through the hands of the angels.[22]

This one sentence (in Greek) is trustworthy since it is incidental to the life, describing a few, passing moments and not written for effect. It tells us much that we need to know about the Deēsis and remedies incorrect views that have become current. First, the term δέησις is used categorically. The passage thus refutes the belief that there is no good reason to suppose that the subject today called the Deēsis was given this name by the Byzantines.[23] More concretely, it contradicts the notion that "the only case where we find the word δέη or δέησις associated with the picture is when a petition is actually being presented to Christ in the name of the donor of the picture."[24] Here there is no question of a donor and no petition, unless one imposes on the text a hypothetical prayer for his soul on the part of Nikon. Nor does it indicate that Nikon *asks for* intercession;[25] he simply takes the mat on which he was accustomed to sleep[26] and dies beneath the holy images. There is no evidence

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[16] Ibid., 115, fig. 25.

[17] O. Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, II. *The Thirteenth Century* (Chicago, 1984), 69.

[18] C. Osieczkowa, "La mosaïque de la porte royale de Sainte Sophie et la litanie de tous les saints," *Byz* 9 (1934), 41–83. This interpretation was roundly rejected by N. Oikonomidès, *DOP* 36 (1975), 155–58, and Oikonomidès' reading in turn questioned by R. Cormack, *Art History* 4 (1981), 139–41.

[19] G. Zacos, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, ed. J. W. Nesbitt (Berne, 1984), nos. 404, 448, 518, 539, 599, 621, 635, 687, 702. N. Oikonomidès has kindly drawn my attention to two other variants: Laurent, *Corpus des sceaux*, nos. 465, 466.

[20] P. Magdalino and R. Nelson, "The Emperor in the Art of the Twelfth Century," *BF* 8 (1982), 141, interpreting a text preserved in Venice, cod. Marc. gr. Z524. As I read this document, the emperor himself was not represented in the image.

[21] *ActaSS*, Nov. 3, ed. H. Delehaye, col. 560E (cited below), based on the 14th-century ms. Athos, Lavra I.127. I am grateful to A. P. Kazhdan for drawing my attention to this passage and to P. Topping for his expert translation. Lazarus died in 1054, and the *vita* was written by his younger contemporary Gregory. Thus Delehaye dated it to the 11th century, as did Ch. Loparev (*VizVrem* 4 [1897], 364–78) and I. Ševčenko (*Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3–4 [1979–80], 723–26). Halkin, *BHG³*, II, no. 979,

simply cited this text without dating it. However, H. G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinische Reich*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1977), 701, saw this Life as "wohl frühestens im 14. Jahrhundert (Beginn)." This is either a mistake or unjustified scepticism, depending excessively on the date of the ms. The *vita* is full of eyewitness references.

[22] Καὶ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ, ἐν ᾗ ἔμελλε τελευτᾶν, μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἑστὼς ἐν τῷ ἀποδείπνῳ, πρὶν ἤ τὴν ἀπόλυσιν γενέσθαι, εὐξάμενος καὶ μετάνοιαν ποιήσας τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς, ἐξῆλθε καὶ εἰς τὸ τραπεζεῖον ἀπελθών—ἐκεῖ γὰρ ἦν ἐπὶ ἐδάφους καθεύδων—ἀνακλιθεὶς ἐπὶ τῆς ψιάθου αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ τόππῳ, ἐν ᾧ ἡ τῆς Θεοτόκου καὶ τοῦ ἀρχαγγέλου Μιχαὴλ θεῖαί εἰσιν εἰκόνες εἰς δέησιν πρὸς τὸν σωτῆρα τεινόμεναι, ἠρέμα τὴν ψυχὴν διὰ χειρῶν ἀγγέλων παραδέδωκε τῷ Θεῷ.

[23] Walter, "Two Notes" (note 3 above), 317. Walter's notion that the term Deēsis is a Russian invention of the 19th century was accepted by R. S. Nelson (*ByzSt* 9 [1982], 352).

[24] Ibid. The term is repeatedly used without reference to a donor in the *diataxis* (1078) of Michael Attaleiates, ed. P. Gautier, *REB* 39 (1981), 89.1195–96.

[25] The passage may articulate the distinction of Asterius of Amaseia (PG 40, col. 324A) quoted by Walter ("Two Notes," 319): "For our prayer (δέησις) is not intercession (παράκλησις) but the recollection of our sins."

[26] Cf. the predictable saintly preference for sleeping on prayer rugs even when a bed was available, in the *V. S. Andreae Sali*, PG 111, col. 705A.

that he chose this situation because it was con-
nected with a painting of the Last Judgment.[27]

Lastly, and most importantly from our point of
view, the figures flanking the Saviour are the Vir-
gin and the archangel Michael; the Prodromos is
not mentioned. There is no doubting Byzantine
belief in the efficacy of either figure as interces-
sors. The actions of the Mother of God in this role
are the subject of a vast body of literature.[28] Those
of the archangel may represent a tradition at least
as old,[29] while elaborate devotions to him in the
eleventh and twelfth centuries are fully attested.[30]
It is certain that Michael's presence in the image is
not to be explained by the dedication of Nikon's
monastery.[31] He is here because he is one of the
three major constituents of the group called the
Deēsis.

Much the same conclusion is suggested by an im-
age in the twelfth-century Skylitzes manuscript in
Madrid.[32] The miniature shows a deacon standing
on a ladder in order to deface icons arranged as
an epistyle on an ambiguous structure that re-
sembles a templon screen even less than it does a
ciborium (Fig. 1).[33] A. Grabar read the panels as

"un archange et une Déisis alignés au bas d'un toit
en coupole,"[34] identifying the event as one of the
attacks on images made by the iconoclast patriarch
John VII "the Grammarian" (known to his ene-
mies as Iannis) while in office. This doubly defies
the text of the Chronicle that our miniature illus-
trates. Skylitzes stipulates that the incident took
place after Iannis' deposition[35] and imprisonment
in a monastery. The chronicler specifies that the
icons were of Christ, the Mother of God, and the
archangels.[36] Whether the Madrid manuscript is
a Southern Italian copy of an illustrated Greek
chronicle or an original Sicilian creation,[37] the
miniaturist has here (as elsewhere) followed the
text faithfully: to the left (from our point of view)
of the frontally disposed Christ, the Virgin turns
toward him with her hands raised in the attitude
of *paraklēsis*. The same gesture of intercession is
made by the two outermost figures. That to our
left is winged; his counterpart is also clearly beard-

[27] Cf. L. Bréhier, *L'art chrétien* (Paris, 1928), 147: "la Déisis
n'est qu'un épisode du Jugement Dernier." On this mistake, see
Walter, "Two Notes," 335–36.

[28] Much of it is cited in Der Nersessian, "Two Images" (note 1
above), where the Virgin's "private" role is emphasized; for her
"public" and political capacities, see Averil Cameron's studies
reprinted in her *Continuity and Change in Sixth-Century Byzantium*
(London, 1981), nos. XVI, XVII.

[29] For a ring of the 5th–7th century, found at Achmim and
bearing, on one side, the image of an angel holding a globe and
a cross-staff and, on the other, the orant Virgin, with pleas ad-
dressed to each, see Forrer, *Die frühchristlicher Alterthümer* (note
76 below), 19–20, pl. XIII.6–60.

[30] Thus, e.g., Niketas Choniates on the commitment of Isaac
II Angelus (1185–95), trans. C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine
Empire, 312–1453* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), 236. The same
devotion of an earlier emperor, Michael IV (1068–71), is not
qualified by the sacred pun involved in having this archangel
offer him the labarum on a gold histamenon (M. Hendy, *Coin-
age and Money in the Byzantine Empire, 1081–1261* [Washington,
D.C., 1969], 41–47, 71–72, pl. 1.9–12).

[31] We do not know at which of the four monasteries on Mt.
Galesios Nikon (or Lazarus) was a brother, but none was dedi-
cated to the archangel: R. Janin, *Les églises et les monastères des
grands centres byzantins*, II (Paris, 1975), 241–45. C. Mango, "On
the History of the Templon and the Martyrion of St. Artemios
at Constantinople," *Zograf* 10 (1979), 40–43, has shown that the
figures of Artemius and the Prodromos on an early 7th-century
epistyle are to be explained as representing the patronal saints
of the church that contained it.

[32] Bib. Nacional, cod. vitr. 26–2, fol. 64v a (A. Grabar and M.
Manoussacas, *L'illustration du manuscrit de Skylitzès de Madrid*
[Venice, 1979], no. 159, fig. 66). For the date, see N. G. Wilson,
"The Madrid Scylitzes," *Scrittura e civiltà* 2 (1978), 209–19.

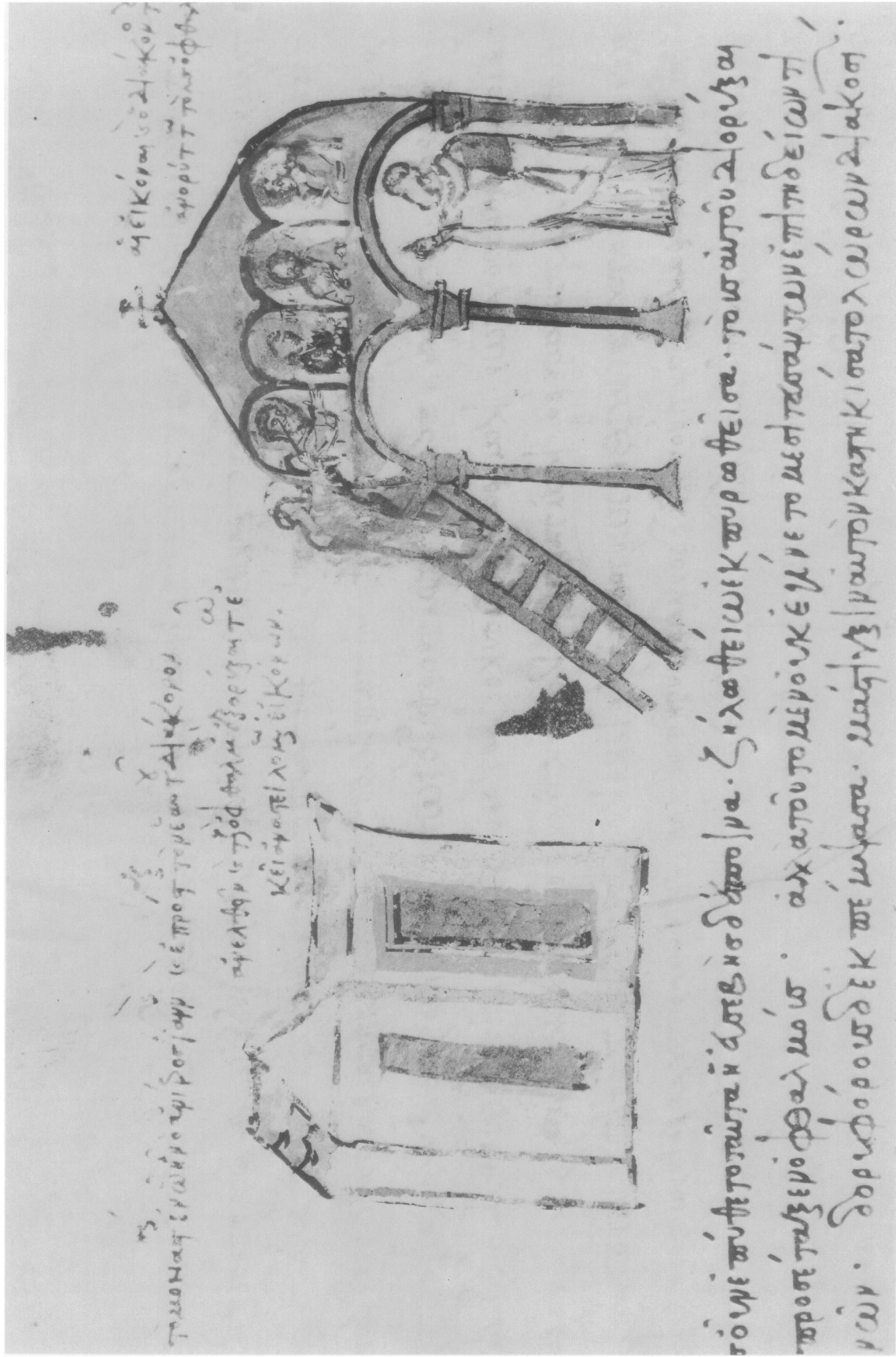[33] Manifest difficulties attend the interpretation of the struc-

ture either as a templon or as a ciborium. Single icons may have
been displayed *within* the latter, although the evidence for such
a practice (see Cormack, *Writing in Gold* [note 6 above], 63, 129,
fig. 18) is limited. Templa—the normal loci of framed panels
attached to an architrave—were not domed. The doors neces-
sary to such a screen are missing from the miniature, as is the
altar that would aid in reading this structure as a ciborium. An
icon of the Virgin turning toward one of a half-length Christ is
attached to a ciborium *over a lectern* in the 12th-century Sinai gr.
418, fol. 269r (J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder
of St. John Climacus* [Princeton, 1954], fig. 213). To see in our
miniature a specific representation of the ciborium at St. Sophia
in Constantinople, as did E. Barbier in *Synthronon*, Bibliothèque
des Cahiers Archéologiques 2 (Paris, 1968), 201 note 26, fig. 1,
is to ignore both Skylitzes' text and the inscription above the
miniature.

[34] *L'illustration* (note 32 above), loc. cit.

[35] Considerable disagreement attends the dating of the dep-
osition: V. Grumel (*EO* 34 [1935], 162–66) suggested 4 April
843; V. Laurent in *Catholicisme, hier, aujourd'hui, demain* 6 (Paris,
1967), s.v. Jean VII le Grammarien, col. 514, declares that the
patriarch was forcibly taken from the patriarchal palace after
the death of Emperor Theophilus (20 January 842).

[36] Skylitzes, ed. H. Thurn, CFHB 5 (Berlin, 1973), 84.84–88:
Ὁ δ' ἀνιέρος Ἰαννης μοναστηρίῳ τινὶ καθειρχθεὶς καὶ ἐν τινι
μέρει τούτου ἀναστηλωμένην θεασάμενος εἰκόνα Χριστοῦ τοῦ
Θεοῦ καὶ τῆς θεομήτορος καὶ τῶν ἀρχαγγέλων, τῷ, ἑαυτοῦ δια-
κόνῳ προσέταξεν ἀναβάντι τῶν σεβασμίων εἰκόνων ἀνορύξαι
τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, εἰπὼν μὴ ἔχειν αὐτοὺς τὴν τοῦ ὁρᾶν δύναμιν.
That the iconoclastic deed took place after the patriarch's dep-
osition is confirmed by Theophanes continuatus, ed. I. Bekker
(Bonn, 1838), 157.15–24, who, however, speaks of the destruc-
tion of only "one icon painted near the ceiling" (εἰκόνος μιᾶς
κατὰ τὸν ὄροφον). Zonaras, ed. Th. Büttner-Wobst (Bonn,
1897), III, 384.68, tells of "an icon of the Saviour Christ" and
then, in the plural, of "the eyes of the holy images."

[37] For the debate, see I. Ševčenko, "The Madrid Manuscript
of the Chronicle of Skylitzes in the Light of Its New Dating,"
in *Byzanz und der Westen*, ed. I. Hutter, SbWien 432 (1984),
124–30.

1. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, vitr. 26.2, fol. 64v. The patriarch Iannis orders the destruction of icons (photo: Biblioteca Nacional)

less and thus cannot be John the Forerunner.[38]
What we have here is another "unrepresentative"
Deēsis group, akin to the *trimorphon*[39] described by
Gregory in his Life of Lazarus, in that the Lord is
flanked by the Mother of God and an archangel,
but enlarged by the addition of another angel.

Thus the Skylitzes picture is also anomalous by
virtue of its four persons. While neither the chron-
icler nor the miniaturist explicitly describes this
group of icons as a Deēsis, more than the mere
positions of the figures suggests that the term was
applied to sets larger than the normal triad. Sev-
enty years after Lazarus the Galesiote died in
1054, a great fire occurred in the quarter of Kiev
known as the Podol. "A certain Christ-loving man,"
we are told in the *Paterikon*,[40] built a church in the
stricken area and set out to commission icons for
it. He gave silver to two monks from the Pĕcerskij
Lavra to give to Alimpij, their brother-monk and a
famous painter. The text specifies that the anony-
mous donor desired "five (icons) of the Deēsis and
two fixed icons."[41] Two of the five figures that make
up this Deēsis are identified later in the rambling
tale, when Alimpij failed to honor the contract (be-
cause, according to the text, his brothers had em-
bezzled the funds) and the abbot of the Pečerskij
miraculously produced the "unmade-by-hand im-
age of our Lord Jesus Christ and (of) his most pure
Mother and his saints."[42] It is possible that the
Prodromos was one of these saints; it is certain that

the group, here explicitly identified as a Deēsis, in-
cluded five figures.[43]

The Kievan story has a terminus ante quem of
1124; the Skylitzes manuscript seems to have been
produced ca. 1142.[44] Even if neither is precisely
datable, one conclusion seems sure: by the middle
of the twelfth century images in a variety of differ-
ent media, showing a varying number of variable
figures, represented what was known beyond the
perimeter of the empire (and, as the *Vita Lazari*
confirms, within it) as the Deēsis.

III

The mutable content of the pictures described
by the term Deēsis is perhaps the most interesting
aspect of the question, one that is both illuminated
by the history of the composition and, in turn, il-
luminates the large number of images of "Deēsis-
type" that have come down to us without a label or
unattached to any text that "explains" their partic-
ular components. For a decade the reality of vari-
ation among the figures peripheral to the central
trimorphon has been pressed upon us by the large
group that makes up the Deēsis in the room above
the vestibule of St. Sophia.[45] Only more recently
has the diversity of the nuclear group been appre-
ciated as an essential aspect of its iconography.[46]
This newer understanding frees us from the no-
tion that the significance of the composition was in
any way tied to the identity of its constituent fig-
ures and from the supposition that where, for ex-
ample, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, appears in
the place usually occupied by the Virgin,[47] she

[38] The identities of the figures were correctly read by S. Cirac Estopañan, *Skyllitzes Matritensis*, I. *Reproducciones y miniaturas* (Barcelona, 1965), no. 165. C. Walter, "The Origins of the Icon-ostasis," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1971), 264, described the structure as a "baldaquin" and followed Skylitzes' identifica-tion of the icons in the miniature, here represented by a line drawing.

[39] For the (recent?) history of this term, see Walter, "Two Notes," 313.

[40] The Kievan *Paterikon*, written by Polycarp and Simon in the late 12th century, was edited on the basis of late 15th-century mss. by D. Abramovič, *Kievo-Pečerskij Paterik* (Kiev, 1930), rpr. as *Das Paterikon der Kiever Höhlenklosters*, ed. D. Tschižewskij, Slavische Propyläen 2 (Munich, 1964). I am grateful to Dr. Jon-athan Shepard for discussing this text with me and to Dr. Mu-riel Heppell for letting me see her forthcoming English trans-lation. On the passage in question here, see V. Putsko, "Kievskij čudožnik XI veka Alimpij Pečerskij," *WSJb* 25 (1979), 63–87, who, however, is concerned not with the Deēsis group but with the two "fixed" icons.

[41] *Das Paterikon*, 176: "pjat' Djesusa i dva namjestje." It must be stressed that this means "five of the Deēsis" not "five of Deē-seis." The fact that seven icons (in all) were required is repeated on the same page. The term *namjestje* is (to me) problematical: I follow Mango's translation; Heppell prefers "dedicatory" icons.

[42] *Paterikon*, loc. cit.

[43] That the Deēsis in the 10th–11th centuries could be distrib-uted over *three* panels or confined within a single frame is made clear by the Georgian Lives of SS. John the Iberian and his son Euthymius: M. Chatzidakis, "Anciennes icônes de Lavra d'après un texte géorgien," in *Rayonnement grec. Hommages à Charles Del-voye*, ed. L. Hadermann-Misguich and G. Raepsert (Brussels, 1982), 427–28.

[44] Ševčenko, "The Madrid Manuscript," 121.

[45] R. Cormack and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Mosaics of St. So-phia at Istanbul: The Rooms above the Southwest Vestibule and Ramp," *DOP* 31 (1977), 202, 246, figs. 26–47. The "witnesses" here include four iconodule bishops. C. Walter, *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church* (London, 1982), 183, rightly calls this com-pound work "the earliest developed Deēsis." However, the sup-plicating angels in the Skylitzes miniature (Fig. 1) and other works require that his description of the Virgin and the Prod-romos as the "two personages [who] alone hold their arms out-stretched" be modified.

[46] Demus, as in note 17 above.

[47] V. K. Mjasoedov, *Freski Spasa-Neredicy* (Leningrad, 1925), 14, pls. XXXVI, LXVII. For the interpretation of Martha as a "stand-in," see A. Frolow, "Sainte-Marthe ou Mère de Dieu," *BByzI* 1 (1946), 79–82.

must be seen as a substitution. Not only may the Deēsis consist of the Lord flanked only by angels—the so-called "Engeldeēsis"[48]—but even Christ may be "replaced," on occasion, by the Mother of God.[49] Local cults may account for the presence of certain saints, such as Mark in the place of the Baptist above the main door of S. Marco in Venice,[50] but the motley group of apostles, monastic saints (such as Macarius and Panteleimon),[51] and even bishops[52] who occupy this position of honor on Middle Byzantine epistyles are not all explicable in patronal terms.

Since this large cast of sacred actors are—by definition as well as by their position—visionaries beholding Christ or his Mother, and most, at the same time, shown in the attitude of turning in supplication (and often bowing), if not actually raising their hands in entreaty, it makes little sense to expound upon their roles in exclusive terms, that is, to see them *either* as intercessors[53] *or* as witnesses to (or participants in) the heavenly host.[54] "A firm univocal definition of δέησις," as has been justly said, "is impossible."[55] Nonetheless, the number of variations on the theme precludes limiting examples to those showing a saint or the Virgin praying, the latter presenting a petition, or an ex-voto image in which a donor acts in this way.[56] Even if the number of instances exhibiting a "normal"

Deēsis still exceeds the quantity of known digressions from the norm,[57] it is not helpful to describe the former as representative and the latter (if only by implication) as exceptional. The deviations must be assumed to represent, at the very least, the intentions of the client and/or his craftsman, both in cases where the motivation is transparent[58] and in those where it has yet to be ascertained.[59] And none of the documents we possess suggests that the donor's wishes, in any case, were unusual.

But, more broadly, to exclude from the class known as the Deēsis works of art that do not fit traditional notions is to fall into two sorts of historical error. First, since images of the Deēsis are likely to be representative of Byzantine art generally—in the sense that both have been decimated by losses—it would be unwise (to say the least) to insist that surviving representations of this theme represent all that were ever created. Indeed, the number of "exceptions" presented above argues in itself for a once even richer diversity. Again, to insist that the Virgin and the Prodromos represent the intercessors most widely credited by the Byzantines is to ignore some texts that attest to Byzantine concerns for intercession. True, the two oldest records that we have of such lost pictures document images depicting Christ, the Mother of God, and the Prodromos. The celebrated passage in the *Miracula SS. Cyri et Ioannis* by Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem (634–638), [60] relates the healing of a young Alexandrian heretic by virtue of his encounter with just such an icon, while the same triad, disposed on individual panels(?), is reported in a less well-known passage in the Life of St. Stephen the Younger (d. 765).[61] But even ear-

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[18] I borrow the term from R. Lange, *Die byzantinische Reliefikone* (Recklinghausen, 1964), 104, no. 36, describing three joined marble reliefs found immured at Topkapu in Istanbul. While the flanking figures in this 12th(?)-century sculpture are half-length, a composition, similar save for its standing angels, on a glazed tile from Nikomedia now in the Walters Art Gallery (P. Verdier, "Tiles of Nicomedia," in *Okeanos. Essays Presented to Ihor Ševčenko on His Sixtieth Birthday . . .*, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 [1983], 632–36, fig. 1) suggests that there is nothing unique about such a composition. Thus the epistyle of the templon in the Blachernae church at Arta (A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines du moyen âge*, II [Paris, 1976], no. 152, pl. cxxvi, b, d) shows two angels supplicating the Virgin.

[19] Ševčenko, "The Madrid Manuscript," 121.

[50] Demus, *The Mosaics* (note 17 above), 67–70, pls. 102–5.

[51] J. P. Sodini, "Une iconostase byzantine à Xanthos," in *Actes du Colloque sur la Lycie Antique*, Bibliothèque de l'Institut Français d'Etudes Anatoliennes 27 (Paris, 1980), 132–35. An unidentified monastic saint "replaces" the Prodromos in a five-figure Deēsis group in a steatite found at Agara in Georgia: I. Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, *Byzantine Icons in Steatite*, Byzantina vindobonensia 15 (Vienna, 1985), no. 23.

[52] M. Büyükkolancı, "Zwei neugefundene Bauten der Johannes-Kirche von Ephesus: Baptisterium und Skeuophylakion," *IstMitt* 32 (1982), 254, pl. 59.

[53] Note 8 above.

[54] Note 9 above.

[55] Walter, "Two Notes" (note 3, above), 324.

[56] Ibid., 323.

[57] The attempt in this article to "open up" the definition of the Deēsis should not be taken as a predisposition to read all similar works as representations of this theme. Even where triadic compositions are employed, as in the reliefs on the Berlin "scepter-tip" (K. Corrigan, *ArtB* 60 [1978], 407–16), the presence of elements, such as the act of coronation, and the absence of others, such as the gesture of entreaty, preclude their interpretation as a Deēsis.

[58] As in the case of a (lost) liturgical roll in which St. Basil is shown interceding for the emperor and the people: Walter, "Two Notes," 321–22.

[59] As in the case of a headpiece to Matthew in a gospelbook (New Julfa, cod. 477, fol. 16r) made at Noravank in 1300, where the pylē is dominated by a Deēsis in which an unbearded apostle (St. John the Evangelist?) stands entreating Christ to his right. I am grateful to T. F. Mathews for drawing this unpublished miniature to my attention.

[60] PG 87³, col. 3557, trans. Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire* (note 30 above), 135–36.

[61] PG 100, col. 1144A. Neither this Life nor the *Miracula* employ the word Deēsis. We identify the images in question as such

lier requests for intercession are addressed to the Virgin and all the saints, without supplementary particulars.[62] Nor, given the little-studied nature of Byzantine private devotion as expressed in artistic commissions,[63] should one exclude the likelihood of appeals being made to *any* member of the heavenly host whose images were approved for veneration by the Church. The *Horos* of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), for instance, lists such pictures as Christ, the Mother of God, the angels, and holy men,[64] again without further specification. Visions of the celestial hierarchy that appeared to male and female saints, as recounted in their Lives, rarely offer greater precision. St. Irene, troubled by the devil one night in or after 842, was comforted (in the order that they are cited in her biography) by the Virgin, Christ, the archangels Michael and Gabriel (to whom the monastery in which she lived was dedicated), and all the heavenly powers.[65]

The Prodromos is not mentioned as part of Irene's vision, and he is likewise absent from the particulars given by Paul the Silentiary in his account of the images on the chancel barrier of the Great Church.[66] Indeed, whether the Deēsis was represented on the screens of St. Sophia and St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople remains a subject of lively controversy.[67] The chancel barriers of these great sixth-century churches almost certainly did not bear "normal" versions of the Deēsis. (The much-damaged reliefs from that at St. Polyeuktos do not appear to include the Forerunner). But if our demonstration that the term, at least as it was used later, can apply to a group other than the ca-

nonical *trimorphon*, and if evidence from the eleventh century can properly be applied to the sixth, then this difficulty as least is removed.

I have no reason to insist that the Deēsis appeared on these great Justinianic monuments and surely none to suppose that it was as widespread in this situation as it was in the Middle Byzantine period.[68] On the other hand, it can no longer be doubted that between the ninth and the twelfth centuries the Deēsis assumed forms that cannot be accommodated within its conventional definitions. This being so, one must allow the possibility that Western works that include, for example, images of archangels turning toward a frontal Christ might echo the broader conception that I have proposed as underlying the Deēsis. This possibility is strengthened when donor figures appear at the feet of the Lord, as Emperor Henry II (1002–24) and Queen Kunigunde do on the gold altarfrontal from Basel cathedral now in the Musée de Cluny, Paris.[69] The stylistic connections between this antependium and Middle Byzantine art have often been noted.[70] Certainly, in light of the wide diversity that obtained in Byzantium, the presence of St. Benedict at the far left of this five-figure composition in no way inhibits reading it as a Deēsis.

Historians of Western medieval art have long expressed dissatisfaction with univocal interpretations of monuments.[71] Nor is this a purely modern problem for it is appreciably related to the high medieval distinction between *significatio* and *suppositio*. In the *Summulae logicales* of Petrus Hispanus (1210/20–77),[72] signification is considered to be a property of words (in the present case, and as it was used in Byzantium, the word Deēsis) not of things, for words signify whereas things are signi-

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because of the description of their contents. It follows logically that other texts, describing pictures with different content, may yet refer to images of the Deēsis which we do not recognize because we a priori exclude them from this class. For the questions surrounding the date of this *vita*, conventionally said to have been written in 807, see Cormack, *Writing in Gold* (note 6 above), 118–20.

[62] Thus, e.g., Maurice, *Strategikon*, ed. G. T. Dennis, CFHB 17 (Vienna, 1981), 68.6–9.

[63] A start has been made in this direction by Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, *Steatite* (note 51 above), 66, who sees images of the Deēsis as especially appropriate to private prayer in that they could facilitate a personal relationship with a saint.

[64] Mansi, 13, col. 252.

[65] *ActaSS*, July 6, col. 608E.

[66] P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius. Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer Zeit* (Leipzig, 1912), 110. S. G. Xydis (*ArtB* 29 [1947], 11) supposed that the Prodromos was included among the "heralds of God" (the prophets) who, along with the archangels, are said by Paul to flank the figure of "the immaculate God." L. Nees (*ZKunstg* 46 [1983], 17 note 8) reasonably objects to this supposition of omission on the part of the normally prolix Silentiary.

[67] See most recently Nees (as in note 66), 16–20.

[68] On this, see A. W. Epstein, "The Middle Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier: Templon or Iconostasis," *JBAA* 134 (1981), 1–28.

[69] P. Lasko, *Ars Sacra*, 800–1200 (Harmondsworth, 1972), 129–30, pl. 130, who suggests a date late in Henry's reign for the antependium. One objection to the understanding of this object as a Latin version of a Deēsis is the absence of any gestures of entreaty. Nonetheless, the similarity between its formal organization and that of the arcuated Byzantine epistyle remains striking.

[70] For these arguments, and the earlier literature, see T. Buddensieg, "Die Baseler Altartafel Heinrichs II," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 19 (1957), 133 ff, and W. Messerer, "Zur byzantinischen Frage in der ottonischen Kunst," *BZ* 52 (1959), esp. 35–41.

[71] For a classic example, see A. Katzenellenbogen, "The Central Tympanum at Vézélay: Its Encyclopaedic Meaning and Its Relation to the First Crusade," *ArtB* 26 (1944), 141–51.

[72] *The Summulae logicales of Peter of Spain*, ed. J. P. Mullally (Notre Dame, Ind., 1949). For an analysis of *suppositio* and its place in medieval thought, see I. M. Bochenski, *Formale Logik* (Munich, 1956), 186–99.

fied. Whoever may be the figures in a Deēsis, the term signifies the same thing. However, it may "suppose" something (or some things) different. In other words, the signification of the Deēsis-bearing object was not affected by the differentiations that patrons or artists imposed upon it. The distinction is between the meaning and application, the intention and extension, the connotation and denotation of a term.[73] I have suggested that the connotation of the Deēsis—that is, its underlying significance—is not to be too narrowly defined. Nor should this be supposed to change with its secondary denotations. To the medieval mind, then, all forms of the Deēsis would be representative of the same essential idea. At this level it mattered little whether there were two, three, or five figures; whether Mark "replaced" the Prodromos, Martha was "substituted" for Mary, or all human forms gave way to angels.

IV

The problem is not so much that the same sign means different things in different contexts ("all signs can be interpreted again and again because every sign, on each occasion it comes into play, holds a slightly or largely different meaning for each interpreter of it")[74] as it is that different signs in different contexts can mean the same thing. Applied to the Deēsis, then, the proper and prior question is not what it represents but what examples of it are representative.[75] Our mutable image may be a classic example of this difficulty, but it is only one instance of a supposedly univocal sign used in contexts that defy its presumed significance. The cross-nimbus, for example, is a motif which, whatever its formal varieties, is always held to designate Christ and to distinguish him from his disciples or martyrs. Yet the nimbus cruciger is found in widely differing cultures attached to figures other than the Lord. A clay lamp, found in the excavation of St. Severin in Cologne, shows Peter holding a key and Paul a cross-staff; behind each of their heads is a large cross-nimbus.[76] Again, among the fragments of the Insular gos-

pelbook, St. Gall cod. 1395, is a miniature of Matthew wearing just such a halo.[77] Two evangelists, Mark and Luke, as well as John's eagle, in a late Carolingian manuscript in Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 45, are similarly endowed.[78] Much later, and returning to the Byzantine world, Sinai cod. gr. 1216, an illuminated sticherarion, has a bust-length image of Mary the Egyptian with a nimbus cruciger.[79] The miniatures, at least, are works of high quality, an important point since it is obvious that an incompetent craftsman is as likely to make iconographical as aesthetic mistakes.[80] More objectively, one may observe that a mistake is possible in any one (or more) of these cases but that the likelihood of all being errors is greatly reduced when each displays the same "mistake."

These examples may have nothing to do with one another and, since they involve a single motif rather than a complex work, do not afford an analogy to the case of the Deēsis. Yet, if the conclusion drawn from them is accepted, it follows a fortiori that variations on a theme used in the culturally homogeneous world that was post-iconoclastic Byzantium are even less likely to be accidental. Moreover, the probability of error is much smaller in elaborate compositions such as the Deēsis, where meaning may be supposed to inhere in the relationship of parts, than in individual motifs the significance of which can be transformed or distorted with a stroke of the brush or chisel.

In the face of unwonted variations, iconographic method traditionally resorts to one of two strategies. The first is to seek to relate the "misfit" to nonartistic data. A particular type of Christ, for instance, may be shown to reflect a theological controversy, or an unusual attribute of the Virgin may be held to embody the content of, say, a homily. In such cases, controls are applied in the form of a text which, if it is not considered to be the *cause* of the variation in question, is believed to "explain" it. The second strategy is, on its face, simpler and employed even when the first is not. It is to com-

[73] Mullaly, *Summulae logicales*, xlii.

[74] J. Sturrock, *New York Times Book Review*, 13 May 1984, 17.

[75] I use the term "representative" rather than "typical" first because the concept of "type" has a specific connotation in Byzantine theology not directly related to the present issue and, secondly and conversely, because in modern English the word "typical" has taken on too imprecise a meaning for my purpose.

[76] R. Forrer, *Die frühchristlicher Alterthümer aus dem Gräberfelde von Achmim-Panopolis* (Strasbourg, 1893), 12, pl. V.2.

[77] J. J. G. Alexander, *Insular Manuscripts, 6th to the 9th Century*, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles 1 (London, 1978), no. 57, fig. 281. Alexander does not comment on Matthew's nimbus.

[78] F. Wormald and J. Alexander, *An Early Breton Gospel Book* (Roxburghe Club) (Cambridge, 1977), pls. E, F, H. The form of these haloes is not remarked upon.

[79] The miniature on fol. 112 is unpublished. K. Weitzmann, *Illustrated Manuscripts at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai* (Collegeville, Minn., 1973), 25–26, suggests that a Latin hand may have participated in the decoration of this book.

[80] See the review by A. W. Epstein of C. Walter's *Studies in Byzantine Iconography* (London, 1977), in *ByzSt* 9 (1982), 161–62.

pare the unexpected variation to the corpus of (supposedly) unvariegated artistic representatives—as I have just done implicitly in the case of the nimbus cruciger—in order to measure the degree to which the problematical example departs from the norm. Its significance (if any) can then be assayed, even if, by this means alone, it cannot be accounted for. Thus our studies are governed by the twin notions of explicability and representativeness.

In truth, the steps that constitute the first strategy are simply a subset of the second. By testing the apparent exception rendered in a visual medium against a body of literary work produced by the same culture we are merely relating it to a much larger sample: both devices are tests of representativeness. And this single (if often far from simple) test is justified because in Byzantium (and probably the medieval world in general) the ratio of preserved to lost productions is much greater in literature than in the visual arts. Precisely because of this statistical incongruity, tests against literature, while a necessary step for the art historian, entail an intrinsic risk. Since the surviving body of literature is much larger, literary exceptions to a rule can be recognized for what they are and (usually) do not need to be "explained." One effect of the difference between the size of the written and artistic samples is that the former can accommodate anomalies, innovations, and *curiosa* without upsetting the conceptual framework within which

the history of Byzantine literature is understood. We *have* the data, so to speak, and therefore do not need to impose on it a predictive value. In art, on the other hand, the sample that we possess is made to play a normative role. Exceptions and oddities cannot easily be reconciled to the assumed norm (e.g., that the bearer of the cross-halo will always be Christ). They must be squeezed into preconceptions based upon a limited number of iconographic types. The typical becomes tyrannical and that which is not representative is held to be an error or, worse, is ignored in framing consequently incomplete iconographic constructs.

One result of this inexorable approach is a devaluation of the richly imaginative range of Byzantine art from the late eighth through the twelfth century when, according to the received wisdom, the almost wanton variety of the pre-iconoclastic period, spawned in the diverse centers that were Alexandria, Antioch, Ravenna, Thessaloniki, and the capital, was replaced by an authoritative body of content that is presumed to have emanated from Constantinople. Such a notion not only slights the inventiveness of artists and patrons in outlying regions of the empire but imposes a chafing and ultimately distorting corset upon the body of Byzantine art both metropolitan and provincial. The extent to which this disfigurement is our own creation is subsumed in the debate over the Deēsis.

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